

# PLATO AND AQUINAS: THOUGHT AND REALITY

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## Introduction

Plato is perhaps the most influential philosopher in the history of the world. R. J. Henle remarks, “Plato, in some way or other, is present in every Western philosophical discussion. Everyone recognizes in Plato an intellectual ancestor of whom we of the West are all heirs.”<sup>1</sup> He developed a complete approach to philosophy that dealt with reality, thought, morality, politics, and aesthetics. He wanted to know the Good. For, he thought, if people knew the Good then they would be good. Plato’s purpose in his philosophical development, then, was to create *the Good State*. This state would be one where people could live in happiness. Thus, his whole philosophical system is attempting to provide for this goal.

Thomas Aquinas was first and foremost a theologian, then a philosopher.<sup>2</sup> This does not mean that he was not philosophical. In fact, he brought philosophical rigor to theology creating and synthesizing a view of reality that has not been equaled.<sup>3</sup> Frederick Copleston notes, “The philosophy of St. Thomas is essentially realist and concrete. St. Thomas certainly adopts the Aristotelian statement that first philosophy or metaphysic studies being as being.”<sup>4</sup> For Aquinas

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<sup>1</sup>R. J. Henle, *Saint Thomas and Platonism* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1956), xiii.

<sup>2</sup>Frederick Copleston, *A History of Philosophy: Medieval Philosophy* (New York: Image Books, 1993), 306.

<sup>3</sup>Etiene Gilson, *The Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas*, 2d ed. trans. Edward Bullough (Cambridge: W. Heffer & Sons Ltd., 1929), ix.

<sup>4</sup>Copleston, *A History of Philosophy: Medieval Philosophy*, 308.

the philosopher uses principles known by human reason, whereas the theologian starts with God as how he has revealed Himself.<sup>5</sup> Aquinas, like Plato, has contributed to our understanding of the world.

Both Plato and Aquinas needed to answer two basic questions. What is real? And how do we know? In the background of their thought is the work of Parmenides. Parmenides claimed that all of reality was one. This, he claimed, is because the principle that ties all of reality together is “being.” For Parmenides since all things are “being” and the only thing that is not “being” is “non-being,” then all being is the same. “Non-being” is nothing and does not exist. Since there is only “being” all the particulars that we apprehend must be an illusion. This line of thought influenced all of philosophy. How does one account for the one (similarities of things) and the many (differences of things)? Plato and Aquinas both have insightful, but divergent views on this point. How they answer Parmenides will largely determine how reality is viewed, and depending on how one views reality will depend on how they develop a theory of knowledge.

This study will start with the respective philosopher’s starting points on answering Parmenides. Plato started with his epistemology and through that he developed his metaphysics. Aquinas, however, began with his metaphysics and developed his epistemology through that. This study will briefly survey each thinker’s thoughts on the topic. Lastly, we will explore a comparison and contrast of Plato and Aquinas and the resulting implications of each one’s philosophy.

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<sup>5</sup>Ibid., 312.

## Plato's Epistemology

Plato's epistemology can be summed-up in one word - "recollection." "Thus, the soul, since it is immortal and has been born many times, and has seen all things both here and in the other world, has learned everything that is" (*Meno* 81c). Plato thought that the soul in its preexistence beheld the Forms directly, but forgot them when the soul inhabited a body. Thus, all of learning is simply remembering the forms. Plato's mentor, Socrates, viewed himself as a "mid-wife" of knowledge. As such, Plato adopted this principle for himself and viewed his role to help people remember in order to know. Constantin Ritter notes, "In every knowing process there is an *a priori* element which must not be forgotten if one wishes to enumerate the indispensable conditions of possible experience. . . . this is one of the greatest achievements of Plato, that he was the first to see this *a priori* element and to describe it."<sup>6</sup> This *a priori* element Ritter refers to is the act of recollection. The Forms will be discussed in the section of Plato's *Metaphysics*, but it should be noted the Forms do intermingle with Plato's theory of knowledge, thus complicating the distinction between the two.<sup>7</sup>

For Plato knowledge is not provided by the senses (*Theaetetus* 186e).<sup>8</sup> Because, "For him the actual physical world, just because it cannot be completely analysed [sic] into combinations of logical concepts, but involves a factor of irrational sensible fact, is incapable of being an object of science proper."<sup>9</sup> Since conduct must be based on knowledge, and knowledge cannot

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<sup>6</sup>Constantine Ritter, *The Essence of Plato's Philosophy*, trans. Adam Alles (New York: The Dial Press, 1933), 123.

<sup>7</sup>Frederick Copleston, *A History of Philosophy: Greece and Rome* (New York: Image Books, 1993), 143.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid.

<sup>9</sup>A. E. Taylor, *The Mind of Plato* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1969), 51.

come from relative truths (such as sense perception), then knowledge must not come from sense perception (*Phaedo* 66a-67b).<sup>10</sup> Remember, Plato is attempting to create a Good Society so moral absolutes must exist and be *known*. Plato, thus, concludes that knowledge must be infallible and of what is the case.<sup>11</sup> Further, since sense perception is neither of these, knowledge must not come from sense perception. A. E. Taylor states, “With Plato the ‘Ideas’ are not ‘states’ of the knowing mind, but objects distinct from and independent of itself, *about* which it has knowledge.”<sup>12</sup>

Further, knowledge, according to Plato, is not simply a true judgment.<sup>13</sup> For it may be the case that a statement is made, but is devoid of knowledge (*Theaetetus* 187A-188C). I may say that “President Bush is conversing with Prime Minister Tony Blair.” While this *may* be true, it cannot be said that I have knowledge of this without some justification. Thus, knowledge cannot be said to be simply a true judgment (*Theaetetus* 200d-201c). Plato suggests that perhaps knowledge is a true judgment<sup>14</sup> plus an account.<sup>15</sup> Yet, what satisfies as an “account?” It cannot be a correct judgment since this is synonymous with true judgment. Nor can analyzing the statement be helpful since this does not convert true judgment into knowledge. Nor can something be identified what it is by a distinguishing characteristic, since this too is inadequate

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<sup>10</sup>Copleston, *A History of Philosophy: Greece and Rome*, 143.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid.

<sup>12</sup>Taylor, *The Mind of Plato*, 43.

<sup>13</sup>Copleston, *A History of Philosophy: Greece and Rome*, 146.

<sup>14</sup>True Judgment is also referred to as True Belief.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., 147.

for knowledge.<sup>16</sup> Plato recognizes the inadequacies of true judgment plus an account (*Theaetetus* 210a). But it is obvious that we do know. Copleston notes, “The conclusion to be drawn is not that no knowledge is attained through definition by means of a difference, but rather that the individual, sensible object is indefinable and is not really the proper object of knowledge at all. . . . true knowledge of sensible objects is unattainable, and - by implication - that true knowledge must be knowledge of the universal and abiding.”<sup>17</sup>

The question remains, then, if we do not know the particular what *do* we know? To this Plato answers that we can have knowledge of the universal.<sup>18</sup> For if we examine any judgments we make that are essential and binding, then we will discover that they are judgments of the universal.<sup>19</sup> True knowledge is knowledge of the universal.<sup>20</sup> A problem arises here, however. How can we have true knowledge of the universal when all that we experience is the world of particulars? For if all that we experience is the particular then we can never have knowledge of the universal, since we will never perceive the universal. For Plato this problem is answered in his metaphysics. He posits a world of universals - the world of Forms - in which we perceive the Forms in our pre-existence directly. Thus, Plato circumvents this objection. Copleston remarks, “the essence of the Platonic theory of Ideas is not to be sought in the notion of the ‘separate’ existence of universal realities, but in the belief that universal concepts have objective reference,

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<sup>16</sup>Ibid., 148.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., 149.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., 150.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid.

and that the corresponding reality is of a higher order than sense-perception as such.”<sup>21</sup> Thus, for Plato, “the ‘Ideas’ [or Forms] are not processes of thought but objects of thought.”<sup>22</sup> How Plato deals with the relation of the particular and the universal we will explore in his metaphysics.

Plato’s theory of knowledge is often associated with his simile of the line (*Republic* 509d-511e). In this simile Plato attempted to show how one moves from opinion to knowledge.<sup>23</sup> In the realm of opinion (i.e., the sensible world) one is concerned with images. As one observes the shadows and images of the sensible world and recognize the things as objects they approach the realm of knowledge. The sensible world contains shadows, images, and reflections which are perceived with the imagination. As one moves to belief they apprehend the objects of the sensible world. Yet, both cognition and belief are within the realm of opinion. The intelligible world, the realm of knowledge consists of lower forms and higher forms. The lower Forms are the objects of thought. The higher Forms are the objects of pure knowledge.<sup>24</sup> Plato understood this progression of the epistemological line as a set of conversions from inadequate to more adequate views on reality - not as a steady progress.<sup>25</sup>

So how is one “converted?” To understand this conversion Plato uses the illustration of the cave (*Republic* 514a-518d). The cave contains prisoners who perceive shadows on the wall which they interpret as the sensible world. These prisoners represent the mass of humanity who

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<sup>21</sup>Ibid., 151.

<sup>22</sup>Taylor, *The Mind of Plato*, 44.

<sup>23</sup>Copleston, *A History of Philosophy: Greece and Rome*, 151.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., 152-60.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., 160.

only behold the realm of opinion and hear whispers of what is real.<sup>26</sup> The shadows they perceive are not the real objects themselves - just representations of the objects. As a prisoner looks for the cause of the shadow they discover there is a barrier which must be crossed. When one crosses that barrier and becomes accustomed to the light, they see a fire that is casting shadows of the object onto the wall as well as the other prisoners. The prisoner discovers that the shadow is obviously not the object itself, but merely a representation of it. As one proceeds out of the cave they again must become accustomed to the light. They cannot enter the cave again at the risk of looking ridiculous since their eyes are no longer accustomed to the darkness. Once their eyes adjust they may see a reflecting pool with an object being reflected in it. Beyond the reflecting pool is the object itself. That is, one perceives the forms directly and unhindered. This happens only when the prisoner is released from the bonds of ignorance. So why is this important? “The man who does not realise [sic] the true good of man will not, and cannot, lead the truly good human life, and the statesman who does not realise [sic] the true good of the State, who does not view political life in the light of eternal principles, will bring ruin on his people.”<sup>27</sup> For Plato, one must know the Good in order to do good. To create the Good State the people will need to know the Good (*Republic* 506a). Copleston notes, “Plato believed in the truly objective reference of concepts. Reality can be known and Reality is rational; what cannot be known is not rational, and what is not fully real is not fully rational.”<sup>28</sup> For Plato, then, one can have knowledge of reality if one has knowledge of the Good. The Good, though, can only be known through philosophical investigation.

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<sup>26</sup>Ibid.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., 162.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., 203.

## Plato's Metaphysics

For Plato the universals that we conceive in thought must have a stable and abiding object of reference.<sup>29</sup> The universal for Plato is “the common nature or quality which is grasped in the concept.”<sup>30</sup> Since it is thought that grasps reality, the objects of thought (i.e. the universals) must also have reality.<sup>31</sup> These universals are called the Ideas or Forms (*Phaedo* 102b; *Republic* 507b). These Forms exist in their own transcendent world (*Republic* 517b). Objects in the sensible world participate, or copy, these Forms (*Phaedo* 102a-b). The Forms, however, exist in an unchanging world, whereas, the sensible objects are subject to change. The Forms that exist in this unchanging world are independent and separate from each other.

It is at this point that the question arises, do the Forms exist or not? That is, do the Forms exist in some mysterious *essential* way, or do they actually exist in which case the sensible world is “unjustifiably duplicated?”<sup>32</sup> Plato is traditionally thought to have held three propositions: 1) The Forms exist apart from each other; 2) The Forms exist apart from sensible things; and 3) The “Demiurge” (sometimes referred to as God) formed the world according to the model of the Forms.<sup>33</sup> Because of these three propositions critics of Plato say that he, “Duplicates the ‘real’ world . . . Posits a multitude of subsistent essences with no sufficient metaphysical ground or basis (since they are independent even of God) . . . Fails to explain the relation between sensible

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<sup>29</sup>Ibid., 163.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., 164.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., 166.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid., 166-7.

things and the Ideas . . . Fails to explain the relation of the Ideas to one another.”<sup>34</sup> It should be noted that Plato *did* see the necessity for a principle of unity between the Forms, and he tried to solve this problem by a new interpretation of the Eleatic doctrine of the One.<sup>35</sup>

So how does Plato respond to these criticisms? Since Plato understood the Forms to exist apart from sensible objects he had to explain how this could be. It seems he understood that the Forms “possessed a reality independent of sensible things.”<sup>36</sup> Plato apparently does not mean that the Forms exist *spatially* apart from sensible things. He is apparently referring to their transcendent nature. As such, even if the soul did view the individual Forms in pre-existence this should only be understood metaphorically and not spatially.<sup>37</sup> Copleston adds, “nor does it even necessarily follow that they are ‘detached’ essences, for they might all be included in some ontological principle of unity.”<sup>38</sup>

Plato seems to understand the Demiurge as the Efficient Cause of the world that fashioned the world after the pattern of the Forms. The Forms are imagined as distinct from the Demiurge.<sup>39</sup> Thus, the Forms are not only independent of the sensible world but are independent of “God.”<sup>40</sup> Copleston warns us however, “there is some reason . . . to think that the Demiurge of the *Timaeus* is an *hypothesis* and that Plato’s ‘theism’ is not to be overstressed.”<sup>41</sup> Thus, if this is

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<sup>34</sup>Ibid., 167.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid., 168.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid., 169.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid.

<sup>39</sup>Taylor, *The Mind of Plato*, 44.

<sup>40</sup>Copleston, *A History of Philosophy: Greece and Rome*, 170.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid.

correct then it is essentially irrelevant to Plato's theory if the Forms are separate from the Demiurge since the Demiurge may not exist at all.

So what exactly are the Forms? First, "the discussion centers round the problem of immortality, . . . truth is not to be attained by the bodily senses, but by reason alone, which lays hold of the things that 'really are.'"<sup>42</sup> The essences of things are what truly are. For example justice, beauty, and goodness in themselves are unchanging and, thus, are not objects of the changing senses but of the unchanging abstract.<sup>43</sup> A particular object is "beautiful" because it participates in the Form of Beauty. Because these Forms are unchanging they are viewed as "subsistent universals."<sup>44</sup> These Forms are absolute and, as such, are not mere concepts, but objective reality.<sup>45</sup> They do not exist outside us only but also in us. They are transcendent and immanent at the same time.<sup>46</sup> It is indicated in the *Symposium* that Absolute Beauty is the ultimate principle of unity for the Forms and, thus, one with the Good.<sup>47</sup> For Plato, the Good is real in itself. The Good gives the unifying principle of the essential order. It is not merely epistemological but ontological as well.<sup>48</sup> Copleston remarks, "it would seem only reasonable to conclude that the One, the Good and the essential Beauty are the same for Plato, and that the intelligible world of Forms owes its being in some way to the One. . . . it is difficult to form any precise notion how Plato derived the Forms from the One; but it is clear enough that the One is

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<sup>42</sup>Ibid., 171.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid.

<sup>45</sup>Ibid., 174.

<sup>46</sup>Ibid., 175.

<sup>47</sup>Ibid.

<sup>48</sup>Ibid., 176.

the unifying Principle.”<sup>49</sup> The implications for this is that “the Idea of the Good may rightly be said to transcend being, since it is above all visible and intelligible objects, while on the other hand, as the Supremely Real, the true Absolute, it is the Principle of being and essence in all things.”<sup>50</sup> Copleston continues, “The One is thus Plato’s ultimate Principle and the source of the world of Forms.”<sup>51</sup> Thus, for Plato the sensible world is “real” only insofar as sensible objects participate in the Forms. The sense world is not necessarily an illusion, but it does have a significant amount of non-reality.<sup>52</sup>

A problem arises for Plato at this point. Since anything that is identified as a universal (e.g., “manness,” “horseness,” etc.) has a corresponding Form, then does not Plato admit another world (i.e., the world of Forms) with nothing but particulars? That is, is Plato simply duplicating this world and calling *it* the real world? Plato responds by asserting that he is not duplicating this world, but that this world is *participating* in the other world. This world imitates the world of Forms, thus, there is no duplication. Reginald Allen remarks, “The relation between these worlds [the world of Forms and the world of Opinion] is one of participation, or imitation: particulars stand to Forms as shadows and reflections of material objects stand to the material objects which cast them; the less real stands to the more real as the dependent (image) stands to the independent (original).”<sup>53</sup> But what of the charge that the world of Forms is only of particulars? To this Plato replies that the Forms participate in the Good or the One and thus are united in that

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<sup>49</sup>Ibid., 177.

<sup>50</sup>Ibid., 178.

<sup>51</sup>Ibid.

<sup>52</sup>Ibid., 179.

<sup>53</sup>Reginald Allen, ed., *Greek Philosophy: Thales to Aristotle* (New York: The Free Press, 1991), 19.

principle, therefore, they are not completely particulars.<sup>54</sup> Likewise, there is a hierarchy of the Forms, “subordinate to the One as the highest and all-pervading Form; but it is to be remembered that for Plato the ‘higher’ the Form is, the richer it is.”<sup>55</sup> This hierarchy links together the world of Forms and the sensible world.<sup>56</sup> Ritter notes, “It is evident that the general concepts or the Ideas (εἶδη) have objective reality, and that the concrete objects depend upon them.”<sup>57</sup>

If the Forms are incorporeal, then how did the sensible world come to be? This is where Plato’s hypothesis of the Demiurge comes in. The Demiurge is seen as “conferring geometrical shapes upon the primary qualities within the Receptacle or Space, and so introducing order into disorder, taking as his model in building up the world the intelligible realm of Forms.”<sup>58</sup> Plato does not explain how this order by Reason is introduced into the chaotic elements.<sup>59</sup> Neo-Platonists identified the Ideas as the thoughts of God (if one were to identify Plato’s One with God).<sup>60</sup>

## **Aquinas’ Metaphysics**

Aquinas starts his inquiry into the nature of reality by starting *with* reality - for this is the

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<sup>54</sup>Copleston, *A History of Philosophy: Greece and Rome*, 184.

<sup>55</sup>Ibid., 186.

<sup>56</sup>Ibid.

<sup>57</sup>Ritter, *The Essence of Plato’s Philosophy*, 90.

<sup>58</sup>Copleston, *A History of Philosophy: Greece and Rome*, 189.

<sup>59</sup>Ibid., 190.

<sup>60</sup>Ibid., 190-3.

“necessary beginning of all philosophy.”<sup>61</sup> For only by the way things *really* are can we possibly know reality.<sup>62</sup> M. C. D’Arcy notes, “It is in experience, therefore, that the mind knows the existent world, and is enabled to peer into the world of essences manifested through the senses.”<sup>63</sup> D’Arcy continues, “His contemporaries, the followers of St. Augustine [who had adopted Platonism], disdained this lowly introduction; they began with Truth, and the idea of it; they assumed that by the very nature of mind they were transported without the aid of sense to a world of pure and immaterial reality. The difference in point of view is well seen in their respective attitude to the ontological argument for the existence of God. St. Thomas would not accept it, and in its place formulated a series of arguments which start from sensible experience, from contingent being revealed to us in it, to the reality of an absolute being.”<sup>64</sup> His metaphysic, then, is closely associated with Aristotle’s. He starts with observation of the world and draws conclusions as necessary.

In answering the Parmenidean problem of monism Aquinas’ answer was similar to Aristotle’s but still vastly different. Aristotle accounted for the differences in Being by maintaining that all beings are metaphysically simple.<sup>65</sup> Aristotle estimated that there are forty-seven or fifty-five of these simple beings.<sup>66</sup> Since these beings are distinct they have no

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<sup>61</sup>M. C. D’Arcy, *St. Thomas Aquinas* (Westminster: The Newman Press, 1953), 75.

<sup>62</sup>Norman Geisler, *Thomas Aquinas: An Evangelical Appraisal* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1991), 91.

<sup>63</sup>D’Arcy, *St. Thomas Aquinas*, 76.

<sup>64</sup>D’Arcy, *St. Thomas Aquinas*, 77. It is fascinating to note that in recent years in the Christian community there has been an increase in interest in the validity of the Ontological Argument. One need only to look at the works of Alvin Plantinga to verify this. Could this signal an increase in the rise of Platonism in Christian academia and, as such, a rejection of Thomistic thought? This does seem to be the trend.

<sup>65</sup>Geisler, *Thomas Aquinas: An Evangelical Appraisal*, 95.

<sup>66</sup>*Ibid.*

commonness between them. The problem with this view is that there is no principle that differentiates the different beings. Since there is no principle of differentiation, then it must be concluded they are the same being (a conclusion Parmenides is all too happy to commend).

Therefore, Aristotle has not sufficiently responded to the challenge of Parmenides.

Whereas, Plato attempted to account for the difference of being by non-being, and Aristotle attempted to account for the difference of being by differing simple beings, Aquinas attempted to account for the difference of being by different *types* of being. Being for Aquinas is that which is.<sup>67</sup> This Being can be either simple or complex.<sup>68</sup> Only an infinite Being (i.e., God) would need to be simple. All finite beings are then composed in their very being. D'Arcy notes, "Objects of experience come and go, they change their appearance and their nature. . . . [being] must be composed of act and potency, act which gives it whatever positive perfection it has, and potency which allows it to acquire a new act or perfection which it has not at the moment."<sup>69</sup> Being, then, for Aquinas is composed of Act and Potency.<sup>70</sup> Act, or actuality, is something's existence (isness), and potency, or potentiality, is something's essence (whateness).<sup>71</sup> The only Being whose existence is identical with its essence is God. There is no potency in God whatsoever. As such, God is pure Being similar to Parmenides' idea of Being.

Aquinas breaks with Parmenides, however, in accounting for the difference of sensible beings such as humans and horses. These creatures have actuality (since they exist), but they also

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<sup>67</sup>Ibid., 101.

<sup>68</sup>Ibid.

<sup>69</sup>D'Arcy, *St. Thomas Aquinas*, 79.

<sup>70</sup>Geisler, *Thomas Aquinas: An Evangelical Appraisal*, 96.

<sup>71</sup>Ibid.

contain potency (since they can go out of existence). People have the capacity to change size, shape, and color. Yet, they are still “persons.” Aquinas concludes that creatures are composed by varying degrees of act and potency.<sup>72</sup> Aquinas states, “since the existence of the compound substance is not of form alone nor of matter alone but of the composed thing itself; and the essence is that according to which a thing is said to exist. Necessarily then the essence whereby a thing is denominated a being cannot be form alone, nor matter alone, but is both, even though in a way only form is the cause of such existence.”<sup>73</sup> Thus, they receive their being from the one that *is* Being, but they are distinct from pure Being in that they have potency. In the sensible world creatures are composed of “form” and “matter.” “Form” is the creature’s “act” and “Matter” is the creature’s potentiality.<sup>74</sup> Creatures, then, are analogous to the Creator. Norman Geisler notes, “Parmenides was wrong because he assumed that ‘being’ is always understood univocally. Aquinas, on the other hand, sees that being is analogous, being understood in similar but different ways. All beings are the same in that they are all actual. Finite beings differ from an infinite Being in that they have differing potentialities that have been actualized.”<sup>75</sup> Aquinas’ position is the best response to Parmenides. His position accounts for the diversity in the world in stating there are different beings, but it accounts for the unity in the world by the simple (if not common sense notion) fact that these different beings *exist*. A true unity in diversity.

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<sup>72</sup>Norman Geisler, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, *Introduction and Bible* (Bloomington, Minn: Bethany House, 2002), 24.

<sup>73</sup>*Thomas Aquinas: Selected Writings*, ed. Ralph McInerny, *On Being and Essence* (New York: Penguin Books, 1998), 33.

<sup>74</sup>D’Arcy, *St. Thomas Aquinas*, 82.

<sup>75</sup>Geisler, *Thomas Aquinas: An Evangelical Appraisal*, 99.

## Aquinas' Epistemology

Aquinas is very similar to Aristotle on his view on knowledge. For Aquinas, like Aristotle, all knowledge begins in the senses. The mind has a capacity to know, but it is a *tabula rasa*.<sup>76</sup> The mind, through sensation, will only know particulars, but the mind is able to abstract universal principles from particulars. How is this possible? Aquinas offers as an explanation, the “agent intellect” (*Summa Theologicae* 1a.79.3). This “agent intellect” is an “active intellect” which empowers the mind to extract universals from particulars. The “agent intellect” uses first principles of knowledge to extract universals.

First principles are undeniable laws of thought. About these principles there is no question. Once the terms are understood, then the principles defend themselves. D’Arcy states, “St. Thomas means . . . that we ought to test everything, even the first principles to see if they are true. He does not hold that there is only one first indubitable truth; there are many truths.”<sup>77</sup> These principles can be part of what proceeds from an effect and is that from which something follows.<sup>78</sup> First principles are the ultimate starting points of thought. Since the realm of knowing is the realm of being they have both an epistemological and ontological dimension.<sup>79</sup> “What we know first and always is being; in a vague and confused way at first and then more determinately, but never as anything other than being.”<sup>80</sup> Ontologically, since the mind knows

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<sup>76</sup>Ibid., 86.

<sup>77</sup>D’Arcy, *St. Thomas Aquinas*, 57.

<sup>78</sup>Geisler, *Thomas Aquinas: An Evangelical Appraisal*, 72.

<sup>79</sup>Ibid., 73.

<sup>80</sup>D’Arcy, *St. Thomas Aquinas*, 59.

reality the mind knows first principles which are based in reality.<sup>81</sup> Therefore, the “so-called problem of knowledge is a false problem” for Aquinas.<sup>82</sup> It is obvious we know reality, for if we doubt we know reality then first principles would be contradictory which is foolishness. It is self-defeating to deny first principles, for to deny them is to use them in the denial.<sup>83</sup> Geisler notes, “first principles may not be directly demonstrable, but they are actually undeniable.”<sup>84</sup>

What then are the first principles? The first is the principle of identity. That is, something is identical to itself, “being is being.” The second is the principle of non-contradiction. That is, something cannot be and not be in the same sense at the same time, “being is not non-being.” The third is the principle of excluded middle. That is, something is what it is and not something else. It cannot be a little of this and a little of that, “either being or non-being.” The fourth is the principle of causality. That is, something causes something. Something does not come from nothing, “everything contingent is caused.” The fifth is the principle of finality. That is, every agent acts for an end, “being as agent acts to communicate itself to an end.”<sup>85</sup> These principles form the basis of all thought. To deny any of them is to use them in the denial, thus they are undeniable. Among these principles Aquinas placed priority with the principle of non-contradiction.<sup>86</sup> Epistemologically, first principles are indispensable since knowledge “depends ultimately on propositions about whose terms there can be no question; their truth is

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<sup>81</sup>Geisler, *Thomas Aquinas: An Evangelical Appraisal*, 83.

<sup>82</sup>D’Arcy, *St. Thomas Aquinas*, 57.

<sup>83</sup>Geisler, *Thomas Aquinas: An Evangelical Appraisal*, 85.

<sup>84</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>85</sup>*Ibid.*, 73-4.

<sup>86</sup>*Ibid.*, 75.

immediately known by inspection.”<sup>87</sup> First principles can give certain objective knowledge. However, the affairs of everyday life are not so certain. Instead, we assent to incomplete and sometimes conflicting accounts of events everyday. This subjective assent is called certitude. Certitude takes into account the reliability of the source of information and ascribes a percentage of how accurate the source is. This is only probable knowledge not perfect knowledge.

So, how does the intellect use first principles? The mind for Aquinas is a *tabula rasa* and, as such, must depend on the senses apprehending reality for the “stuff” of knowledge. The senses “cannot take us beyond the sensible order; they are intuitional so far as they go.”<sup>88</sup> They simply apprehend a particular sensible object. “Sense provides him [man] with individual differences, and so it is that his judgment is always synthetic and his knowledge of reality always by means of concepts.”<sup>89</sup> It is up to the mind to abstract the universal concept. How does the mind abstract the universal from a particular? The mind abstracts the universal by the “agent” intellect or the “active” intellect. This “agent” intellect is capable of separating out the universals from the particular. “The mind, as it were, feeds on the world of reality or being, but . . . it does not change the nature of the form offered to it.”<sup>90</sup> For example, when one perceives a tree they are perceiving *that* tree and not some other tree. Nevertheless, the mind is able to abstract *treeness* from the particular, which is what is common between all trees. Trees have certain characteristics and the mind is capable of sorting and categorizing these characteristics

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<sup>87</sup>Ibid., 78.

<sup>88</sup>D’Arcy, *St. Thomas Aquinas*, 66.

<sup>89</sup>Ibid.

<sup>90</sup>Ibid., 69.

into universal concepts according to its species or kind. Further, it should be noted that the mind is not perceiving the “form” or “idea” of the tree, but the mind is perceiving *that* particular tree. The tree essentially becomes one, insofar as the person knows it, with the person who knows it.<sup>91</sup> Thus, statements that differentiate between the tree in reality and the tree in my mind are false. The tree in reality *is* the tree in my mind insofar as I know it. Yet, the concept of *treeness* does not exist in any particular tree but in all trees. Therefore, we are able to know not only universal concepts (unity) we are also able to know particular objects (many). D’Arcy comments, “[One] knows reality for what it is in itself, and yet he knows it according to the mode of his own spiritual being and as a perfection of himself. . . . There is a conforming of the mind to the real object, and this process of conforming is luminous to the mind which, by its very nature, is always self-conscious or reflective.”<sup>92</sup> Again, Thomism accounts for the problem of unity and diversity.

### **Comparing Plato and Aquinas**

How does Plato answer the Parmenidean problem? Plato assumed he had answered Parmenides sufficiently (*Sophist* 285c-259d). How did he answer Parmenides? Since Plato thought the world of Forms answered the problem of the sensible world the problem he had to answer was the differentiating principle of the Forms themselves. He did this by assigning the Forms as different from anything else (*Sophist* 255d). That is, it is called the “other.”<sup>93</sup> We know what something is because it is *not* something else. Each Form is different because it is not the

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<sup>91</sup>Ibid.

<sup>92</sup>Ibid., 69-70.

<sup>93</sup>Geisler, *Thomas Aquinas: An Evangelical Appraisal*, 94.

same Form.<sup>94</sup> Geisler comments, “What it [the Form] is, is determined by what it is not.”<sup>95</sup> The problem for Plato, however, is that he never actually answers Parmenides. For example if a tree is cut down and half of it is made into a chair and the other half into a table, then what is the difference? They may have different shapes, but they are still the same substance. Parmenides’ problem still stands because there is no differentiation within the Forms themselves.<sup>96</sup> Thus, Plato has not answered Parmenides.

How does Aquinas answer the Parmenidean problem? Within Aquinas’ metaphysics the answer exists. As noted above, “Parmenides was wrong because he assumed that ‘being’ is always understood univocally. Aquinas, on the other hand, sees that being is analogous, being understood in similar but different ways. All beings are the same in that they are all actual. Finite beings differ from an infinite Being in that they have differing potentialities that have been actualized.”<sup>97</sup> Aquinas’ position is the best response to Parmenides. All beings are similar in that they actually exist, but they differ because they have different types of existence. “The Thomistic School of Scholastic philosophers . . . admit a ‘real distinction’ between essence and the act of existence in created being; but, for them, the distinction is *within* the creature. Uncreated Being is Absolute Existence and Absolute Essence in identity.”<sup>98</sup> Likewise, Henle notes, “For Platonism, being constructed upon a basis of distinct specific concepts, treats *esse* or ‘being’ like any other concept. It has no privileged position as act or perfection; no over-

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<sup>94</sup>Ibid.

<sup>95</sup>Ibid.

<sup>96</sup>Ibid., 95.

<sup>97</sup>Ibid., 99.

<sup>98</sup>Copleston, *A History of Philosophy: Greece and Rome*, 166.

reaching reference to all other perfections. . . . Whereas, in Saint Thomas, *esse* is the act of every perfection and so lies outside, so to speak, of the pattern of conceptual essences. It is because of this insight into *esse* that the establishment of an unlimited *esse* is at the same time the establishment of Infinite Perfection.”<sup>99</sup> Aquinas was the first philosopher to develop this response to Parmenides, though others had hinted at it (like Aristotle).<sup>100</sup>

Some note similarities between Plato and Aquinas. Both held that objective reality was knowable. Both admitted that there were objective moral absolutes. Both incorporated the idea of Form and Matter. Both believed that “spiritual matters” exist. These similarities, notwithstanding, do not negate significant differences between the two. While each held reality was knowable they went about the process totally differently. Whereas, Plato did not rely on the senses, Aquinas necessitated the senses as the receptors for the “stuff” of knowledge. While both admitted moral absolutes the grounding of these absolutes was different. For Plato absolutes were rooted in the impersonal Good. Aquinas, associated, moral absolutes in the nature of the personal God (some writers associate God *as* the Good that Plato refers to). While both used the terminology of Form and Matter they had different views of how these should be understood. For Plato the Forms exist independently and is in the Matter, like air in a balloon. For Aquinas, the Forms exist in the Mind of God and is united with Matter to create the being. In regards to Ideas Henle notes, “For perhaps in no other particular is there more clearly apparent evidence that Saint Thomas incorporated Platonic theories into his own thought.”<sup>101</sup> Aquinas dealt with a

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<sup>99</sup>Henle, *Saint Thomas and Platonism*, 357-8.

<sup>100</sup>Geisler, *Thomas Aquinas: An Evangelical Appraisal*, 96.

<sup>101</sup>Henle, *Saint Thomas and Platonism*, 358.

series of questions dealing with Ideas. About this Henle observes, “When Saint Thomas does approach the question [of Ideas], he first determines the meaning of the word ‘Idea,’ the ‘*ratio ideae*’; he then answers the standard questions: Are there Ideas? Are there many Ideas? Ideas of what? by applying this definition to the doctrine already elaborated for exemplarism and knowledge. *No new development in the substance of the doctrine* appears within these questions.”<sup>102</sup> That is, Aquinas is assumed to be close to Plato in his view of Ideas. However, even this comparison is strained. There may be some similarities, but “The Thomistic doctrine of the Divine Ideas is . . . founded on premises and arguments quite different from those upon which Platonic theory rests. . . . The Platonic ideas are subsistent and distinct entities; they are universal and of universals; they in no sense include matter; they are *principles* of knowledge of *sensibilia*; the Divine Ideas, on the other hand, are not entities, much less distinct entities.”<sup>103</sup> Thus, the similarities between Plato and Aquinas on their views of Ideas are fundamentally different, but superficially similar. Plato’s view of Ideas (or epistemology) affected his metaphysics, and Aquinas’ view of metaphysics affected his epistemology.

## Conclusion

Copleston concludes, “The Platonic Theory of Forms is unsatisfactory. Even if the One or Good represents for him the ultimate Principle, which comprises all the other Forms . . . Plato may have thought that he had solved the problem of the Χωρισμός [separation] from the epistemological standpoint, by his doctrine of the union of λόγος [expression], δόξα [opinion] and αἴσθησις [perception] in the apprehension of the ἄτομα εἶδη [base idea]; but, ontologically

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<sup>102</sup>Ibid., 359. (Italics in original).

<sup>103</sup>Ibid., 360-1.

speaking, the sphere of pure Becoming [the sensible world] remains unexplained.”<sup>104</sup> However, Copleston does insist, “We cannot afford to dismiss *a priori* the notion that what there is of order and intelligibility in this world has an objective foundation in an invisible and transcendent Reality, . . . Plato not only attained a considerable measure of truth in his metaphysic, but also went a long way towards showing that it *was* the truth.”<sup>105</sup> Whatever else may be said about Plato he was the most influential philosopher of the early Greeks and, perhaps, the whole world.

Aquinas synthesized philosophy and theology in a unique way that still demands ones acknowledgment as the most likely view of reality of the world that has not been attained since.<sup>106</sup> Again Copleston remarks, “The problem for St. Thomas was not how to introduce philosophy into theology without corrupting the essence and nature of *philosophy*, but how to introduce philosophy without corrupting the essence and nature of *theology*.”<sup>107</sup> Thomistic thought is a comprehensive view of not only theology but the world. Etienne Gilson comments on why Thomism should be studied today, “Even to-day [sic] it still represents, as the heir of Athens no less than of Bethlehem and of Rome, Western thought in its most complete form, determined to sacrifice nothing of whatever may give more truth, more beauty, more love and order. This is the reason why Thomistic Philosophy, accepting and gathering up the whole of human tradition, legitimising [sic] and arranging it in order, deserves still to-day [sic] that we should turn to it for counsel; for it bears the very semblance of our highest ideal.”<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>104</sup>Copleston, *A History of Philosophy: Greece and Rome*, 202.

<sup>105</sup>*Ibid.*, 205.

<sup>106</sup>Gilson, *The Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas*, viii.

<sup>107</sup>Copleston, *A History of Philosophy: Medieval Philosophy*, 306.

<sup>108</sup>Gilson, *The Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas*, x.